

Holy Week 2021 Wednesday

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Disruption and strength (Mark 13.28-37)

We all know that Jesus taught in parables - we looked at one last night. But do we ever ask why he used them so much?

The word parable is derived from two Greek words which mean putting things alongside each other. So parables are storytelling devices which use ideas set in contrast. But the way in which they do that is magical.

In a superb book called *Speaking in Parables*, Sallie McFague explores the role of the parable in theological narrative and storytelling. She argues that parables set the familiar (this world) in an unfamiliar context (for example, the Kingdom of God). In doing so, she says, the unfamiliar becomes the interpretative framework - the lens or the filter perhaps - for understanding our everyday experience in this world.

The fundamental insight on which parables are based is that it is through disruptive mystery in *this world* that God makes his presence known to us. By consciously setting the ordinary against the extraordinary we might say that we come to a new awareness that there really is no divide between the mundane and the divine. This is a realisation that our daily experience is infused with the presence of God if we can open ourselves fully to grace at work among us. It is the appreciation, in the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins, that,

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God
It will flame out like shining from shook foil*

Importantly, the comparison which goes on in a parable is not just setting this world against God's world, leaving us feeling better about the former because of the existence of the latter. Instead, McFague argues that the contrast brings out the radical nature of God's grace at work *within* this world, in such a way that we cannot see this world in the same way again.

Like poems, parables communicate a beauty which evaporates if one tries to do more than simply contemplate it. The *only* way to encounter the teaching of a parable

is to tell the tale and leave it to the mind's contemplation. Parables make words mean more than they normally do. Properly engaged with, they take us into a transcendent encounter where the world takes on new colour and meaning. They help us to glimpse something beyond ourselves yet in our midst. And *contemplation* is key: parables do not offer insights which are readily or freely available but instead require devotion, meditation, perhaps even a lifetime's attention. The corollary is that a parable never runs out: it speaks afresh in the mind of every new reader and reminds us of the continuing dynamism of Jesus' teaching throughout the ages into the present and the future.

By teaching in parables, then, Jesus disrupts a complacent interaction with the world around us. He takes ordinary stories and makes them extraordinary by setting them in a frame which asks us to contemplate God at work within them. He chooses to do this in a way which is unsayable otherwise but which also keeps talking afresh to us beyond his death and resurrection: his words in the gospel are fixed for all time, but the way that they speak to us, through the medium of our contemplative imagination, means that Jesus' teaching continues to be fresh, personal and active in the present. He is talking to us now, tonight, just as he was talking to his disciples then.

So be it, but you might wonder why I am talking about parables, given that the reading in Mark tonight makes no mention of the word (as all the famous parables do). In fact the word which is translated as 'lesson' in verse 28 is, in the original Greek, *parabole*. The King James translators rendered the word into English as 'parable', so why not, we might ask, the translators of the New Revised Standard Version?

In your service booklet you will find a picture of an exquisite stained glass window at Iffley church just outside Oxford. It is called *The Flowering Tree* (or *The Tree of Life*) and is the work of Roger Wagner. When one stands before the window in real life it takes a moment to see the Christ figure at the centre. Instead, the blossom which erupts from the tree catches the eye, as does the clear stream flowing into the foreground and the fuzzy little herd of sheep. It is only after a little while, a moment of contemplation, that out of this beauty comes the painful fragility of the figure of Jesus, right at the centre of the tree, and suddenly all of the scene's beauty seems to radiate out from that paradoxical centre of cruelty and torture.

How can this be? Well, clearly it is a magnificent illustration of grace: the notion that we enjoy reconciliation with God because of the sacrifice of his son. Even more than this, though, the picture questions the very idea of an easy division between pain and joy, life and death, sin and redemption. For the longer the eye dwells on the figure of Jesus, the more one is struck by the gradations of light and dark on his figure. The pain of the cross is clear in that half of his body which is obscured in darkness, but his left flank is brilliantly alive with light. This is not a crucifixion scene which suggests that pain and joy are unrelated. Here, in the gradations of light and dark we see something that we are all probably familiar with: that in our daily lives and in our relationship with God, our deepest sorrows and our most profound joys communicate with each other. Christ is the figure who holds these polarities together and by gathering them into himself, brings them to some kind of reconciliation in his person. The honesty of this depiction then starts to emerge from the tree and the surrounds themselves. For we see, with further contemplation, that the blossom is not all light but much of it takes on its colour from contrast with darkness: the pink that glows is set against the brooding dark blue and black of the surrounding sky. The sheep, so instantly desirable and innocent, live, in fact, in the shadows, peering into the light but held back in the darkness of the cross. The stream, which seems so bright, contains (hard to see) little fish, darkly set against the froth of the water.

To my mind, this stained glass is a picture parable. It sets a spring scene against the sacrifice of the cross and speaks to me about the symbiosis of light and dark, pain and joy and optimism and fear in my life. (If you want another picture parable, look very closely at the lion on your Golden Syrup tin.)

The point I want to make is this. A parable doesn't have to be framed as a grand narrative but can take place whenever we look beyond mundane experience to something sacred within it. This isn't how we have traditionally thought about parables but it's true. It flows from the very nature of them. I suggest that Jesus didn't teach in parables because it was a handy way of making his point (though it was that) but also because it encouraged us to change the way we encounter life.

Perhaps this evening's biblical translator rejected the word 'parable' because there was no great narrative arc as Jesus discusses the fig tree here, so they thought 'lesson' would do. There is some overlap between the concepts, but rejecting 'parable' takes our eye off what is happening.

For we are inclined to look on weakness, like the tenderness of the young fig tree branch, as a problem. The young haven't worked out how things go yet, so what can they tell us? Or they're too weak to find full expression and need our guidance and supervision. But this is to impose our own filter: to deny the vitality of youth its authentic expression. To forget the as yet unmoulded energy of God's activity in young things, in young people. It is to fail to spot that the Kingdom of God is really at hand in that kind of unmediated freshness of life and expression.

Now if that is the fruit of our contemplation, where does it take us? Surely it doesn't stop at the fig tree but forces re-evaluation of all our experience. Where are we failing to see the sweetness of the divine because our eyes only see the vulnerability of the weak and the young?

And, we might ask, how is our attitude to God tempered by our assumptions about strength? For ours is a God who sent not a superman to us, but someone who started as a helpless baby in a stinking stable and ended as a condemned man dying on a cross. Yes, the empty tomb speaks of power. But it means nothing without the man on the cross.

So a few sentences about a fig tree provoke us to think about our innermost selves and the nature of God. Parables are disruptive things. Amen.